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PERSONHOOD, AUTONOMY, AGENCY AND RESPONSIBILITY: AN APPRAISAL OF FRANKFURT'S PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION

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Abstract: There is a common sense in which words like person or personhood, autonomy, agency and responsibility are used. Talking of these terms merely as words does not reveal the essence of the term. Therefore, these terms have to be treated as concepts and this paper intends to talk about the use of these concepts with a greater philosophical interest with reference to Harry G. Frankfurt's philosophy of action.

Keywords: Person; Freewill; Agency; Responsibility; Philosophy.

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There is a distinction between concept and a word, for example, the word 'person' is commonly used as merely the singular form of 'people' and in that sense both these terms – person and people – connote no more than membership in a certain biological species. However, in the philosophical sense of the term, mainly in philosophy of action[1], the criteria for being a person do not serve primarily to distinguish the members of our own species from the members of other species. Rather, they are designed to capture those attributes which are the subject of our most humane concern with ourselves and the source of what we regard as most important and most problematical in our lives. Now these attributes would be of equal significance to us even if they were not in fact peculiar and common to the

[1] The philosophy of action is an area in philosophy concerned with theories about the processes causing willful human bodily movements of a more or less complex kind. See [https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/action/] accessed on 19.12.2012.

members of our own species. What interests us most in the human condition would not interest us less if it were also a feature of the condition of other creatures as well.[2]

It is clear while defining a person that it is not only a human species and general person among people or only a human kind. A person can be defined on the basis of his conduct in his daily as well as common life, his concern with others and important characteristics which also play a very important role in the life of a person (like a person decides something, behaves in a particular way, learns from his environment and performs accordingly). It is conceptually possible that members of novel or even of familiar non-human species should be persons. We do in fact assume, on the other hand, that no member of another species is a person. Accordingly there is a presumption that what is essential to persons is a set of characteristics that we generally suppose—whether rightly or wrongly—to be uniquely human.[3] It means only humane concern is not sufficient for being a person because some non-human species can also show kindness towards others or their characteristics also (some of them) similar to the human species in some way. In Harry G. Frankfurt's view:

> One essential difference between persons and other creatures is to be found in the structure of a person's will. Human beings are not alone in having desires and motives, or in making choices. They share these things with the members of certain other species, some of whom even appear to engage in deliberation and to make decisions based upon prior thought. It seems to be peculiarly characteristic of humans, however, that they are able to form what I shall call 'second-order desires' or 'desires of the second order'.[4]

Following Frankfurt's view, it is clear that both human beings as well as non-human species have desires, they want to have something or even they are free to make choices and to do everything but human beings can reflect upon their thoughts, they do things on the basis of past experiences, these experiences I am not saying in terms of a habit (or routine which a dog also can learn) but in terms of our understanding, like, we can reflect upon our desires. Frankfurt avers:

> Many animals appear to have the capacity for what I shall call 'first-order desires' or 'desires of the first order', which are simply desires to do or not to do one thing or

[2] Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the will and the concept of a person," in Gary Watson (ed.), *Free Will*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p.323.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

> another. No animal other than man, however, appears to have the capacity for reflective self-evaluation that is manifested in the formation of second-order desires.[5]

Therefore, we can come to a finding also whether some body's action is performed with one's first-order desire or the second-order desire. To identify an agent's will is either to identify the desire (or desires) by which he is motivated in some action he performs or to identify the desire (or desires) by which he will or would be motivated when or if he acts. An agent's will, then is identical with one or more of his first-order desires.[6]

Suppose a man wants to be motivated in what he does by the desire to concentrate on his work. It is necessarily true, if this supposition is correct, that he already wants to concentrate on his work. This desire is now among his desires. It is his desire to concentrate on his work that moves him to do what he does, then what he wants at that time is indeed (in the relevant sense) what he wants to want. Here comes the choice that he can choose among his desires, and he concentrates on what he wants and autonomy comes in when he wants what he wants to want among his desires. Further quoting Frankfurt:

> Someone has a desire of the second order either when he wants simply to have a certain desire or when he wants a certain desire to be his will. In situations of the latter kind, I shall call his second-order desires 'second-order volitions' or 'volitions of the second order'. Now it is having second-order volitions, and not having second-order desires generally, that I regard as essential to being a person.[7]

In the above quotation, it is explained that an agent with second-order desires, but with no volitions of the second order, is not a person because he does not care about his will. His desires move him to do certain things, without its being true of his either that he wants to be moved by those desires or that he prefers to be moved by other desires. When a person acts, the desire by which he is moved is either the will he wants or a will he wants to be without. There is a very close relationship between the capacity for forming second-order volitions and another capacity that is essential to persons—one that has often been considered a distinguishing mark of the human condition. It is only because a person has volitions of the second order that he is capable both of enjoying and of lacking freedom of the will.

[5] Ibid., pp.323-4.
[6] Ibid., p.325.
[7] Ibid., p.327.

The concept of a person is not only, then, the concept of a type of entity that has both first-order desires and volitions of the second order. It can also be construed as the concept of a type of entity for whom the freedom of its will may be a problem.[8] Here a fundamental philosophical question is to be raised – Are we free to act? Because it's the problem of freedom of action with which a person is most immediately concerned when he is concerned with the freedom of his will. If we say, being free is fundamentally a matter of doing what one wants to do. Then, the notion of an agent who does what he wants to do is by no means an altogether clear one. We do not suppose that animals enjoy freedom of the will, although we recognize that an animal may be free to run in whatever direction it wants.

Thus, having the freedom to do what one wants to do is not a sufficient condition of having a free will. It is not a necessary condition either, "For to deprive someone of his freedom of action is not necessarily to undermine the freedom of his will."[9] When an agent is aware that there are certain things he is not free to do, this doubtless affects his desires and limits the range of choices he can make. But suppose that someone, without being aware of it, has in fact lost or been deprived of his freedom of action. Even though he is no longer free to do what he wants to do, his will may remain as free as it was before. Now freedom of action is (roughly, at least) the freedom to do what one wants to do. Analogously, then, the statement that a person enjoys freedom of the will means (also roughly) that he is free to want what he wants to want. More precisely, it means that he is free to will what he wants to will, or to have the will he wants.[10] Such freedom of action also leads us to question, whether a person is morally responsible for what he has done or not and this question rises in two ways: First is if he free and his will is also free and he is free to exercise his will; and the second one is if he is not free or he is not having any free will. Regarding this Frankfurt takes this position:

> It is not true that a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if his will was fee when he did it. He may be morally responsible for having done it even though his will was not free at all.[11]

It is generally agreed that a person who has been coerced to do something did not do it freely and is not morally responsible for having done it. Now the doctrine that coercion and moral responsibility are

[8] Ibid., p.330.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., p.331.
[11] Ibid., p.334.

mutually exclusive may appear to be no more than a somewhat particularized version of the principle of alternate possibilities. It is natural enough to say of a person who has been coerced to do something that he could not have done otherwise. And it may easily seem that being coerced deprives a person of freedom and of moral responsibility simply because it is a special case of being unable to do otherwise. The principle of alternate possibilities may in this way derive some credibility from its association with the very plausible proposition that moral responsibility is excluded by coercion.[12] The question just how 'he could have done otherwise' is important to the theory of freedom and has no bearing on the theory of moral responsibility. For the assumption that a person is morally responsible for what he has done does not entail that the person was in a position to have whatever will he wanted. This assumption does entail that the person did what he did freely, or that he did it of his own free will.

It is a mistake, however, to believe that someone acts freely only when he is free to do whatever he wants or that he acts of his own free will only if his will is free. Suppose that a person has done what he wanted to do, that he did it because he wanted to do it, and that the will by which he was moved when he did it was his will because it was the will he wanted. Then he did it freely and of his own free will. Even supposing that he could have done otherwise, he would not have done otherwise; and even supposing that he could have had a different will, he would not have wanted his will to differ from what it was. The doctrine that coercion excludes moral responsibility is not a particularized version of the principle of alternate possibilities. Situations in which a person who does something cannot do otherwise because he is subject to coercive power are either not instances of coercion at all, or they are situations in which the person may still be morally responsible for what he does if it is not because of the coercion that he does it.

When we excuse a person who has been coerced, we do not excuse him because he was unable to do otherwise. Even though a person is subject to a coercive force that precludes his performing any action but one, he may nonetheless bear full moral responsibility for performing that action.[13] What is missing here according to me is 'intention' because it has also a significant role in the performance of an action and choices (within freedom also), will cannot be departed from intentions. Possibilities must be counted with the intentions also. Whenever we decide something, we always intend towards that. We

[12] Harry G. Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," in Gary Watson (ed.), *Free Will*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p.168.
[13] Ibid., p.171.

propose to show that similarities between 'intending' and 'deciding' are for greater than it has been usually accepted. The view that 'intending to do' does not involve 'deciding to do' rests upon the assumption that the concept of 'intention resembles more with the concepts of 'want' and 'desire' than that of 'decision'. This assumption seems to have some connection with the fact that human beings tend to profess to have intentions which they, in fact, do not have.[14]

Since action is intentional movement, or behavior whose course is under the guidance of an agent, an explication of the nature of action must deal with two distinct problems. One is to explain the notion of guided behavior. The other is to specify when the guidance of behavior is attributable to an agent and not simply, as when a person's pupils dilate because the light fades, to some local process going on within the agent's body. The first problem concerns the conditions under which behavior is purposive, while the second concerns the conditions under which purposive behavior is intentional.[15]

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